



Stand Alone Resources

# Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency

In the often referenced international research on bilingual education conducted by Jim Cummins (1979), two types of proficiencies in learning a second language were identified. These proficiencies for bilingual children are known as the Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). It is helpful to first teach English language learners the Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills before moving into teaching Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency.

- **Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS)** are everyday, social language. They are the basic language ELLs use when greeting people, talking among themselves, going through their daily routines, etc.
- **Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)** is the language used for more abstract purposes. For example, concepts related to math, science, reading comprehension, learning colors, numbers, calendars, and basic concepts.



Tips related to BICS and CALP are included after the chart below.



## BICS and CALP – continued

### Tips Related To BICS

- Start by teaching everyday language, using simple sentences.
- Talk about events in the present tense.
- Teach social language. (For example: please, thanks, lunch, bathroom, etc.)
- Stimulate social interaction in both languages.
- Speak to children in English using many visual cues. Use gestures and facial expressions.
- Use visuals, multi-sensory experiences, role playing, gestures, and props.
- Use running commentary techniques like “Now I am going to put the sugar in the bowl.”
- Use songs to help children learn new phrases and sentences such as, “Hello, how are you doing?”
- Help the child acquire and use English words for objects within the child’s immediate environment.
- Follow routines. (For example: organize circle time)
  - » Include songs and movement with highly predictable components.
  - » Introduce theme materials, keeping them short and simple.
  - » Allow children “wait time” to respond to your questions.

### Tips Related To CALP

- Build children’s background knowledge before reading a book.
- Use a story frame map. This is a graphic organizer of the major events of the story.
- Tell the story orally before you read it to the children.
- Retell the story orally after reading it in English.
- Write important vocabulary words related to the story or theme in both languages.
- Act out the story with the children.
- Have bilingual dictionaries available in the classroom. If you do not know how to translate a specific word in the child’s native language, you can reference the dictionary.
- Provide books reflecting the child’s native language.
- Have books available in both languages.
- Set books in all the learning centers.
- Translate a story if you know the child’s language.
- Read the book first in the child’s first language and then in English, so the child will know basic concepts before you read the book in the second language.
- Use the child’s native language to draw upon prior knowledge about a concept.



## BICS and CALP – continued

### Differences between BICS and CALP

<b>BICS</b> (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills)	<b>CALP</b> (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency)
Every day social interaction	Academic language
Conversations, talking with friends	Concepts related to math, literacy, science
Everyday communication, daily routine	Formal language, written communication
Informal language: simple questions, common social greetings	Following a story, ability to define words
Words that can be easily defined by pointing to a picture (For example: the word "cat")	Words that cannot be demonstrated, but need to be explained (For example: uncle)
BICS do not transfer between languages	Transfers between languages. Knowing the concept of counting in one language transfers to the other language. The child does not need to relearn this concept. A strong cognitive ability in the first language will transfer to a strong cognitive ability in the second language. Concepts do not need to be relearned. Only the labels for the new language need to be learned.
Takes less time to acquire, less complex	Takes longer to learn to acquire, more complex and demanding
Words that have the same meaning in both languages (For example: family-familia – English and Spanish have almost the same word.)	Words like "between," "among," "by," "estimate"

## BICS and CALP – continued

### More on Language Acquisition

In the past, teachers encouraged ELL families to adopt the American language and culture as quickly as possible. Today, families are encouraged to give importance and value to the home language and culture. This bond fosters stronger family relationships while building language and literacy skills in more than one language.

Children will experience simultaneous and sequential language acquisition. Simultaneous Language Acquisition is when both languages are learned at the same time. Sequential Language Acquisition is when the child has a strong command of the home language and begins to learn a new one – the second language could begin at any age.

If children grow up in a home where both languages are used, their brains and the process of language development will absorb unique sounds and formations in both languages. A possible result is that the children will code switch, mixing the two languages together. Code switching is a natural step in bilingual children.

Simultaneous Language Acquisition	Sequential Language Acquisition
Both languages are learned at the same time.	Child has one native language and begins to learn a new one—the second language could begin at any age.
Simultaneous language acquisition happens when children are raised from birth in an environment where two languages are spoken.	This is where the use of four stages of second language acquisition can be observed.
Example: Mother speaks English and father speaks Spanish. Child will learn both languages and speak to each parent in their native language.	The stronger the home language skills the easier it is to learn a second language.
If children are raised in a second language acquisition environment from birth, their brain development absorbs unique sounds and formations from each language.	In general, code-switching occurs when children mix languages together. (e.g. “Voy al store.” “I’m going to the store.”) Code-switching is natural for bilingual children.
Children initially have a smaller vocabulary in English compared to their English-speaking peers. But if you combine the vocabulary size in both languages, they actually know a higher number of words than their English-speaking peers.	Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP): Two types of proficiency for bilingual children. It is helpful for young ELLs to know BICS before moving on to CALP.

